



PLANT-TRIAL RESULTS | EXPERT TESTED

Geraniums

*The best
of the best*

After testing 180 varieties for
15 years, the results are in

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Rozanne
geranium

Geraniums (*Geranium* spp. and cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8) are terrific. It really is that simple. We could talk about their landscape versatility, cultural adaptability, and superior ornamental traits. Or we could talk about their sheer variety: There are about 300 species and a plethora of cultivars and hybrids in the world. But geraniums are simply awesome garden plants because of their beauty and their tried-and-true reputation. Despite these good traits, there are, unfortunately, a few less-than-stellar varieties out there, and nobody wants to be the one to spend their money on a stinker. That is why I decided to put more than 180 of them to the test, and you'll find my conclusions on many of those trialed in the pages that follow.

My love of geraniums began when I first saw the luminous flowers of 'Johnson's Blue', certainly one of the most well-known and beloved cultivars of all time. But when I trialed it, I found 'Johnson's Blue' to be a lax plant with a penchant for floppiness and a fairly short bloom period. Although it was the go-to blue geranium for many years, it has been surpassed by an array of newer and more exciting selections.

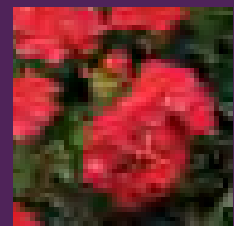
Until we started our trial, my familiarity with geraniums—aside from the most popular garden staples—was somewhat lacking. But I know gardeners who, astonishingly, have never grown a single geranium. Perhaps that is because there are so many to choose from—maybe too many. I also wonder if gardeners just assume that geraniums are all the same or if the overpopularity of a few select varieties has created a comfort zone that keeps gardeners from straying off the path. After 15 years of testing, I've thankfully discovered a vast trove of indispensable geraniums—as well as a few that I wish I'd never laid eyes on.



Everything you need to know about GERANIUMS

► DON'T GET THEM CONFUSED WITH THEIR COUSINS

True geraniums (*Geranium* spp. and cvs.) are often referred to as "hardy geraniums" to distinguish them from their tender cousins: the colorful bedding (or zonal) geraniums (*Pelargonium* spp. and cvs., top right). An alternate common name of true geraniums, cranesbill, is a nod to their slender fruit, which resemble the beak of a crane.



► THE FOLIAGE CAN BE AS COOL AS THE FLOWERS

Most geraniums have attractive foliage, and although quite variable, their leaves are generally lobed and often deeply dissected. Leaf colors range from bright green to gray-green, but there are a number of varieties that have purple, bronze, or yellow leaves. Many, however, don't hold their foliage color throughout the season. We had the best success with Victor Reiter strain, a seed strain of meadow geranium (*G. pratense*) that loses its deep purple leaf color in midsummer but turns purple again in fall.

Geraniums can bloom from spring to autumn for a few weeks or many months, depending on the variety. While the blue-flowered selections seem to be de rigueur for modern gardens, geraniums come in pink, magenta, purple, and white. The somber, near-black blossoms of the aptly named mourning widow geranium (*G. phaeum*, left) are some of the most interesting.

► TRIM THEM BACK FOR A BETTER HABIT

Although geraniums are not high-maintenance plants, most must be cut back after flowering. Shearing stems back to new basal leaves reins in unruly habits and rejuvenates plants to an almost springlike quality. There are a few exceptions to this rule: Bigroot geranium (*G. macrorrhizum*), Cambridge geranium (*G. × cantabrigiense*), bloody geranium (*G. sanguineum*), and Wlassov's geranium (*G. wlassovianum*) do not need shearing after flowering. You can also skip the shearing on late-blooming creeping geranium (*G. soboliferum*) and ever-blooming Rozanne geranium (*G. 'Gerwat'*). Deadheading also reduces self-seeding, which can be excessive.

► COLOR DOESN'T END WHEN THE FLOWERS DO

Come autumn, many geraniums turn shades of purple, red, orange, or yellow—and often on the same plant (right). Cambridge geranium and bigroot geranium are among my picks for the best autumnal displays.



► THEY'RE NOT PICKY ABOUT CONDITIONS

Geraniums are generally easy to grow in a variety of light conditions from full sun to full shade and in most soils, except those that are overly wet or too dry. Rich, moist soil is ideal for most geraniums—even drought-tolerant species, such as bigroot geranium. Morning sun will encourage stronger habits and better flower production on shade-loving geraniums, and will enhance leaf color on bronze-leaved forms, like 'Elizabeth Ann' and 'Espresso'. In hot regions, afternoon shade is priceless in keeping geraniums happy and healthy.

► PESTS AND DISEASES PLAGUE ONLY SOME TYPES

Geraniums are rarely troubled by diseases or pests, but powdery mildew, leaf spotting, rabbits, and Japanese beetles are occasional problems. Powdery mildew was notable on cultivars of meadow geraniums only, while Japanese beetles found the many cultivars of Druce's geranium (*G. × oxonianum*) delectable. And mourning widow geraniums, especially 'Margaret Wilson', proved to be irresistibly succulent treats for rabbits.

A close-up photograph of several purple flowers with yellow centers, likely Geraniums, growing in a garden. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, and the background is a soft-focus green and yellow.

HOW WE DID THE TRIAL



- **NUMBER EVALUATED:** 180

- **CRITERIA:** Ornamental qualities, ease of growth, hardiness, and disease and pest resistance

- **USDA HARDINESS ZONE:** 5b

- **CONDITIONS:** In our full-sun trial garden (with well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil) or in our shade trial garden (with dappled shade from nearby trees and moist, well-drained soil)

- **CARE:** Minimal, thereby allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions

'Orion'

Top performers

Rozanne ('Gerwat', photo, p. 38) is unquestionably the most popular geranium today and certainly deserving of the accolades it has received, including the 2008 Perennial Plant of the Year and Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit. The white-eyed, purple-blue flowers are not always present in great quantities, but the plant is perpetually in bloom. I'm especially fond of the iridescent flowers in autumn, when cool weather sets in and not much else is blooming. Rozanne's large, mounded habit with trailing flower stems is well suited to massing, but a single plant shines on its own, too. Because the flowers are sterile, they do not produce seed and, therefore, bloom for an extended time. In my garden, I grow Rozanne with the lavender-and-creamy-white blossoms of 'Mrs. Robert Brydon' clematis (*Clematis* 'Mrs. Robert Brydon', Zones 4–9); this sublime pairing is a hit for several weeks in late summer.

Everything about '**Orion**' is supersize—from the abundance of the nearly 2-inch-wide, purple-blue flowers to its robustly spreading stems. At 30 inches tall and 6 feet wide, 'Orion' is a bit of a bruiser, topping the list as the largest geranium in the trial. Despite its size, 'Orion' never seems bulky, thanks to its fine-textured, dissected leaves. Like many geraniums, new leaves emerge as flowering winds down, ultimately pushing the floral stems away from the new growth. This is your cue to shear the old stems back to the base and to let the new leaves have their day.

It's true that I have quite a few favorites when it comes to geraniums, but if pushed to choose just one for my garden, I would likely pick **bigroot geranium** (*G. macrorrhizum*). It's one of the easiest plants I know of to grow: It is adaptable to sun or shade, is drought tolerant, and doesn't need shearing. And it's beautiful, too, with magenta-pink to white flowers in spring; lush foliage that turns red, orange, and burgundy in fall; and a refined spreading habit. Some of its many cultivars have unique flower colors—including 'Lohfelden', which has elegant, soft pink blooms, and 'Czakov', which boasts lusty, deep magenta blossoms. Bigroot geraniums are easily distinguished from other species by their slightly sticky, aromatic foliage; the scent is variably described as "minty," "medicinal," or "malodorous."

Although it is no longer the most popular geranium in town, I still love '**Brookside**'. In our trial this variety had a compact, well-mannered habit that was far superior to the floppy 'Johnson's Blue'. In my own garden—where it gets more competition—'Brookside' is a bit rambunctious, but the pretty pale-eyed flowers are still delightful as the stems weave and wind through their neighbors. The flowers are reminiscent of 'Johnson's Blue' but are darker with overlapping petals. Once 'Brookside' has finally exhausted itself in midsummer, I cut the stems back hard to encourage new leaves. An added bonus are the finely dissected leaves, which turn red and burgundy in autumn.



**Bigroot
geranium**



'Brookside'

GERANIUM TRIAL RESULTS

RATING	NAME	EXPOSURE	HEIGHT	WIDTH	FLOWER COLOR	FLOWER SIZE (DIA.)	BLOOM PERIOD	FLOWER COVERAGE
★	Geranium 'Ann Folkard'	Full sun to partial shade	18 inches	36 inches	Dusky purple	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. 'Blue Cloud'	Full sun to partial shade	26 inches	40 inches	Pale lavender-blue	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. Blue Sunrise ('Blogold')	Full sun to partial shade	24 inches	36 inches	Lavender-blue	1¼ inches	Late spring to midsummer	Good
★★★★	G. 'Brookside'	Full sun to partial shade	24 inches	38 inches	Lavender-blue	1½ inches	Midspring to late summer	Good
★★★	G. × cantabrigiense 'Biokovo'	Full sun to full shade	9 inches	20 inches	White, pink blush	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. × cantabrigiense 'Cambridge'	Full sun to full shade	9 inches	21 inches	Deep pink	1 inch	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★★	G. × cantabrigiense 'Jans'	Full sun to full shade	10 inches	50 inches	White, pink blush	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★★★	G. × cantabrigiense 'St. Ola'	Full sun to full shade	10 inches	43 inches	White	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Good
★	G. clarkei 'Kashmir Purple'	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	20 inches	Purple	1¼ inches	Midspring to early summer	Poor
★★★	G. 'Dilys'	Full sun to partial shade	14 inches	48 inches	Light magenta	1 inch	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★	G. gracile	Full shade	10 inches	15 inches	Lavender-pink	1 inch	Midspring to midsummer	Poor
★★★	G. himalayense	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	30 inches	Blue	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. himalayense 'Baby Blue'	Full sun to partial shade	13 inches	31 inches	Lavender-blue	2¼ inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. himalayense 'Gravetye'	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	30 inches	Blue	2 inches	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★	G. himalayense 'Irish Blue'	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	24 inches	Lavender-blue	2 inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. ibericum 'Rosemoor'	Full sun	12 inches	18 inches	Violet-blue	1½ inches	Late spring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. ibericum ssp. jubatum 'Vital'	Full sun	14 inches	22 inches	Purple	1½ inches	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★★	G. 'Johnson's Blue'	Full sun to partial shade	24 inches	33 inches	Blue	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. macrorrhizum	Full sun to full shade	14 inches	32 inches	Magenta	1 inch	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Czakor'	Full sun to full shade	12 inches	36 inches	Dark magenta	1 inch	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Ingwersen's Variety'	Full sun to full shade	14 inches	42 inches	Light pink	1 inch	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Lohfelden'	Full sun to full shade	8 inches	18 inches	Very pale pink	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Excellent
★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Pindus'	Full sun to full shade	10 inches	22 inches	Magenta-pink	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Ridsko'	Full sun to full shade	14 inches	32 inches	Magenta-pink	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. macrorrhizum 'Variegatum'	Full sun to full shade	17 inches	34 inches	Rosy pink	1 inch	Midspring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. maculatum 'Beth Chatto'	Partial shade	13 inches	21 inches	Pink	1½ inches	Early spring to midspring	Good
★★★	G. maculatum 'Elizabeth Ann'	Partial shade	22 inches	30 inches	Lavender-pink	1¼ inches	Early spring to early summer	Good
★★★	G. maculatum 'Espresso'	Partial shade	18 inches	27 inches	Lavender-pink	1¼ inches	Early spring to midspring	Good
★★	G. maculatum f. albiflorum	Partial shade	15 inches	21 inches	White	1¼ inches	Early spring to late spring	Fair
★★★★	G. 'Moran'	Full sun	24 inches	26 inches	Violet-blue	1¼ inches	Early spring to late spring	Excellent
★★★	G. 'Nimbus'	Full sun to partial shade	24 inches	36 inches	Purple-blue	1 inch	Midspring to late summer	Good
★★★★	G. 'Orion'	Full sun to partial shade	30 inches	72 inches	Purple-blue	1¾ inches	Midspring to late summer	Excellent
★★★	G. × oxonianum 'A. T. Johnson'	Full sun to partial shade	17 inches	25 inches	Pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to late summer	Good
★★	G. × oxonianum 'Claridge Druce'	Full sun to partial shade	16 inches	27 inches	Violet-pink	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Poor
★★★	G. × oxonianum 'Lady Moore'	Full sun to partial shade	17 inches	24 inches	Pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★	G. × oxonianum 'Phoebe Noble'	Full sun to partial shade	16 inches	30 inches	Dark pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. × oxonianum 'Rebecca Moss'	Full sun to partial shade	22 inches	36 inches	Silvery pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to late summer	Good

RATING KEY

★★★★ Excellent

★★★ Good

★★ Fair

★ Poor

★	G. × oxonianum 'Rose Clair'	Full sun to partial shade	19 inches	22 inches	Rose-pink	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Poor
★★★	G. × oxonianum 'Southcombe Star'	Full sun to partial shade	17 inches	26 inches	Pale pink	1 inch	Midspring to late summer	Good
★★	G. × oxonianum 'Wargrave Pink'	Full sun to partial shade	14 inches	24 inches	Pink	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. palustre	Full sun to partial shade	12 inches	45 inches	Magenta-pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★	G. 'Patricia'	Full sun	18 inches	24 inches	Magenta	1½ inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★	G. phaeum 'Lily Lovell'	Full sun to partial shade	14 inches	28 inches	Maroon	¾ inch	Midspring to late spring	Fair
★★★	G. phaeum 'Margaret Wilson'	Full sun to partial shade	13 inches	27 inches	Purple w/ white eye	¾ inch	Midspring to late spring	Good
★★	G. phaeum 'Samobor'	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	20 inches	Maroon	¾ inch	Midspring to late spring	Fair
★★	G. 'Philippe Vapelle'	Full sun	16 inches	18 inches	Blue-violet	1½ inches	Midspring to late spring	Fair
★★★	G. platypetalum	Full sun to partial shade	16 inches	25 inches	Violet-blue	1¾ inches	Midspring to early summer	Excellent
★★	G. pratense Midnight Reiter strain	Full sun	8 inches	12 inches	Purple-blue	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. pratense 'Mrs. Kendall Clark'	Full sun	24 inches	38 inches	Lavender-blue	1¼ inches	Midspring to early summer	Fair
★★★	G. pratense 'New Dimension'	Full sun	11 inches	33 inches	Lavender-blue	1¼ inches	Late spring to midsummer	Good
★★	G. pratense 'Plenum Violaceum'	Full sun	18 inches	30 inches	Violet-blue	1 inch	Late spring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. pratense Victor Reiter strain	Full sun	14 inches	21 inches	Purple-blue	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★	G. psilostemon	Full sun	12 inches	24 inches	Dark magenta	2 inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★	G. psilostemon 'Bressingham Flair'	Full sun	26 inches	30 inches	Light magenta	2 inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★	G. renardii	Full sun	7 inches	18 inches	White and lavender	1½ inches	Midspring to late spring	Fair
★★	G. renardii 'Zetterlund'	Full sun	11 inches	15 inches	Lavender	1¼ inches	Midspring to late spring	Fair
★★★	G. Rozanne ('Gerwat')	Full sun to partial shade	20 inches	60 inches	Purple-blue	1½ inches	Early summer to late fall	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Aviemore'	Full sun	10 inches	26 inches	Purple	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Canon Miles'	Full sun	12 inches	36 inches	Purple-pink	1 inch	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Connie Hanson'	Full sun	20 inches	24 inches	Light pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Elke'	Full sun	20 inches	36 inches	Dark pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Elsbeth'	Full sun	20 inches	32 inches	Magenta	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Good
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Kristin Jakob'	Full sun	14 inches	34 inches	Purple-magenta	1 inch	Early spring to midsummer	Good
★★	G. sanguineum 'Max Frei'	Full sun	12 inches	29 inches	Magenta-pink	1 inch	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. sanguineum 'New Hampshire'	Full sun	20 inches	32 inches	Magenta	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. sanguineum 'Rod Leeds'	Full sun	20 inches	60 inches	Magenta	1¾ inches	Late spring to midsummer	Good
★★	G. sanguineum var. striatum	Full sun	11 inches	25 inches	Pale pink	1¼ inches	Early spring to midsummer	Fair
★	G. soboliferum	Full sun to partial shade	12 inches	22 inches	Purple	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. 'Spinners'	Full sun to partial shade	20 inches	30 inches	Purple-blue	1½ inches	Midspring to midsummer	Fair
★★★	G. 'Sweet Heidy'	Full sun	20 inches	72 inches	Purple w/ pale eye	1½ inches	Late spring to late fall	Good
★★★	G. sylvaticum 'Baker's Pink'	Full sun to partial shade	18 inches	18 inches	Pink	1¼ inches	Midspring to late spring	Good
★	G. sylvaticum 'Nikita'	Full sun to partial shade	10 inches	18 inches	Violet	1½ inches	Early spring to late spring	Poor
★★★	G. sylvaticum 'Silva'	Full sun to partial shade	15 inches	18 inches	Violet	1½ inches	Early spring to late spring	Good
★★★	G. 'Tiny Monster'	Full sun	18 inches	54 inches	Magenta	1½ inches	Late spring to late fall	Good
★★★	G. wallichianum 'Buxton's Variety'	Full sun to partial shade	16 inches	48 inches	Purple-blue	1½ inches	Late spring to late fall	Good
★★★	G. wlassovianum	Full sun to partial shade	20 inches	36 inches	Purple	1¼ inches	Late spring to early fall	Good

'Ann Folkard'

Top performers



Blue Sunrise

Standing out in a field of blue-flowered geraniums requires a little something extra. Golden chartreuse leaves flushed with red are just the thing that set **Blue Sunrise** ('Blogold') apart. The vibrant spring leaf color, which is enhanced in sunlight, fades to yellowish green just as the lavender-blue flowers open in late spring. Blue Sunrise is believed to be a hybrid of yellow-leaved 'Ann Folkard' (photo, p. 43) and blue-flowered 'Buxton's Variety' geranium (*G. wallichianum* 'Buxton's Variety').

'Sweet Heidi' is touted for its unique tricolored flowers of lavender-blue, pink, and white. But that's a somewhat deceptive description because the three colors aren't present on the flower at the same time. The fresh flowers are pinkish purple with a pale eye, and as they age, the purple morphs into a bluish color. Quibbling about the flower color does not lessen the remarkable floral display because the blooms are plentiful from late spring into fall. 'Sweet Heidi' looks like a pink-flowered Rozanne because of its mounded habit and trailing stems. The rambling stems enable this plant to look great in hanging baskets, in containers, or dangling over low walls.

At first glance, **'Elizabeth Ann'** (*G. maculatum* 'Elizabeth Ann') is extremely similar to 'Espresso'



'Elizabeth Ann'



'Sweet Heidy'

geranium, but in the end, I prefer 'Elizabeth Ann' for its superior floral and foliar qualities. Its lavender-pink flowers with nicely overlapping petals are significantly darker than 'Espresso'. Both cultivars have distinctive, chocolatey bronze-colored leaves in spring, which eventually fade to a summer mix of bronze and green. But the more lustrous leaves of 'Elizabeth Ann' bring an unexpected brightness to a shady garden. Both cultivars reseed plentifully and appear to come true from seed, but they express some seedling variability, too; we discovered a number of seedlings, for example, with superior leaf color to either cultivar.

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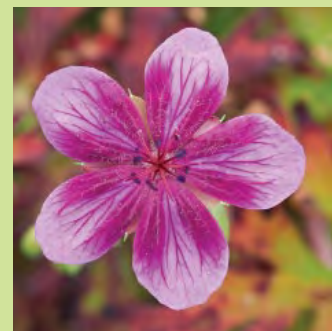
New kids on the block

PLANT BREEDERS can't get enough of geraniums. Just when you think you've seen every cultivar out there, another crop is introduced. Some of these new selections are fleeting, but others are showing enough promise in their first few years of trialing that I believe they deserve a bit of press.

Because it blooms out of sequence from most other geraniums, **'Starman' creeping geranium** (*G. soboliferum* 'Starman') was a bit of a sleeper; it wasn't until the second year that I realized it was something special. It is a prolific late bloomer—not starting until late summer—with a charming two-toned flower. The 1½-inch-wide purple flowers are patterned with darker veins and marked with a prominent starburst in their centers. 'Starman' has a refined mounded habit (16 inches tall and 36 inches wide) all summer and doesn't need deadheading. It tops off the impressive floral show with respectable red fall color, too.

Given my newfound appreciation for 'Starman', I was jazzed about evaluating **'Butterfly Kisses' creeping geranium** (*G. soboliferum* 'Butterfly Kisses'). Like 'Starman', 'Butterfly Kisses' is equally prodigious in bloom but begins flowering a week or so later (at the very end of summer) and carries on well into late fall. The 1½-inch-wide, light purple-pink flowers are without a starry eye; each blossom is, instead, beautifully striated with prominent red-purple veins. 'Butterfly Kisses' is slightly bigger (20 inches tall and 50 inches wide) than 'Starman' and does show off some red and orange fall color.

I'm usually reticent to talk about plants that have just begun their trial, but I'm quite taken by **'Perfect Storm'**, a new introduction with pretty, dark-eyed, magenta-pink flowers. Dramatic, dark purple veins burst from the smoldering black eye, giving the plant a singular exuberant look. Last year, 'Perfect Storm' was in constant bloom from spring to late fall, with handsome, downy, gray-green leaves complementing the eye-catching flowers. The low-growing plant (8 inches tall and 24 inches wide) has trailing stems radiating out from the mounded crown. I imagine that 'Perfect Storm' cascading over a stone wall or in a hanging basket would be perfection.



'Starman'



'Butterfly Kisses'



'Perfect Storm'

[SOURCES]

The following mail-order plant sellers offer many of the geraniums featured:

- **Digging Dog Nursery**, Albion, Calif.; 707-937-1130; www.diggingdog.com
- **Geraniaceae.com**, Kentfield, Calif.; 415-461-4168; www.geraniaceae.com
- **Lazy S'S Farm Nursery**, 2360 Spotswood Trail, Barboursville, VA 22923; www.lazyssfarm.com